

The Mystery at Zeke's

BY PHILIP VERRILL MIGHELS

WHEN little Mollie Worthington rolled up her sleeves and took in hand a rolling-pin of exceptionally ominous dimensions, her four husky mining-camp suitors stirred uneasily upon their seats and underwent a vague, instinctive alarm.

They were sitting here in Mollie's cabin with a sort of truce between them, each determined to outstay his neighbor and thereby create an opportunity for wooing the plump young widow. Now, however, not even the beauty of Mollie's pretty elbows could quite reduce the sense of impending disaster which each and all experienced as she gripped that bread-tool firmly in her hand and turned to scan their faces, one by one. That something was coming, all the men were thoroughly convinced. It came without delay.

"Frank Peters," said Mollie incisively, "what date is this lovely afternoon?"

Mr. Peters seized his great mustache with both his hands and groomed it savagely.

"Why—May the—somethingth, 1868," he stammered, awkwardly, attempting a smile that looked sadly in need of a tonic. "Why was you askin'?"

"Just for your own pretty sake," answered Mollie, standing the rolling-pin on end on the table. "I want you to put down the date the best way you can, for this is the day you git fired. You may be dyin' to remember it when you're married to some other woman, some day."

Peters stared at her dumbly for a moment. Then he said,

"Ain't this a kind of clammy way to give me the bounce, with these here fellows settin' 'round grinnin' at the joke?"

"Oh, they're goin' to git the same, right away," said Mollie with delightful candor and cheer. "I don't want you all goin' off together. Savvy?"

"You don't have to hit *me* with no kitchen club," asserted Peters. "Hope

you'll git married to a strong, nervy man, some time—that's all!" He took up his hat and departed.

The three remaining suitors writhed where they sat. Each had a feeble hope that he might, at least, be the last to be told to decamp. It was laughing Bud Ingalls who was next excused. He burst into most hilarious merriment as he went, for such was his means of expressing all his emotions, from wee to genuine amusement.

Of the two men still awaiting calamity, one was Patrick McFarlan, a red-headed Irish teamster, and the other was Thomas Fulton, sometime sheriff of the camp ten miles away, but now once more a common mining-man, ready alike for riches or for poverty.

"Now, then, it's the Blarney stone to go next," said Mollie, inexorably. "And, Mr. McFarlan, don't burn the door-frame up at the top while you're walkin' out."

McFarlan's head grew hot without delay.

"T' hell wid the dure, then," he answered, as he clapped on his hat. "I'm throwin' ye out of me heart that fast that ye niver got in at all entoirely!"

He slammed the door so emphatically that Mollie gasped for breath. Thomas Fulton settled firmly on his three-legged stool. He waited in silence.

Mollie faced him bravely for nearly a minute, then her brown eyes faltered before his dancing gaze, and the crimson crept swiftly up from her throat, across her cheeks, to the very roots of her hair.

"Well," she said, turning her back and making brisk pretence of preparing for work, "have you put down the date, Mr. Fulton?"

"No," said her suitor, calmly. "I was figurin' up and sort of mentally jottin' down a date like, say, about June the third—which I think comes along on a Sunday."



Drawn by Leon Gaspard

Half-tone plate engraved by W. H. Clark

"KEEP YOUR DISTANCE, TOM!" SHE CRIED

"June the third?" repeated Mollie. "And that's the date of what?"

"Date of our marriage—if things go right," said Thomas, his eyes grown more merry than before. "You didn't think I was scared at you bouncin' the boys, I should hope? My kind of love is diff'rent. You ain't reckonin' on throwin' out such a nugget of love as mine?"

"You shut up, Tom Fulton," said Mollie, resuming control of her various emotions. "I won't have you talkin' love to me any more, and you know it! Have you learned any trade since you spoke to me before? You know you ain't?"

"Ain't I a miner?" said Tom, unabashed. "Ain't that a trade?"

"No, it ain't a trade—it's a game. It's playin' blind man's buff," said the sturdy young widow, whacking the table with her rolling-pin. "Bein' sheriff ain't a trade, and gittin' married ain't a trade—they're all just takin' chances. And you can't come here makin' love to me till you know something better than any of the lot, by way of a business."

"Well, I'm willin', ain't I?" answered Fulton, rising to approach her. "And besides, Mollie, you love me."

"Keep your distance, Tom!" she cried at him suddenly. "Don't you come a step closer! I say I ain't a-goin' to marry you or let you come around here any more—unless you settle down and do something sensible to earn an honest livin'!"

"You ain't goin' to ask me to sew pants and shirts again, are you, Mollie?" Tom inquired, anxiously. "It don't foller that a man which can thread a needle and sew on a button kin make a suit of clothes."

"I told you before that you and me could set up in business, makin' all the men's shirts for both these minin' camps," said Mollie, relenting not a whit from her decisiveness. "If you ain't the man to learn a trade and start a business, why, don't play you're man enough to come 'round askin' me to be your wife. And you needn't stay 'round here any longer this afternoon, anyway. You put on your hat and skeedaddle, and think things over nice and quiet."

"But what about the way I love you?" Tom insisted. "If I make a strike in the mine—"

"Can you make a strike while you're standin' here gassin'?" said Mollie. "If you want to talk to me, you make the strike first, or else begin a-learnin' to make shirts!"

Tom went away from the cabin, convinced that the heart of a woman and the heart of a mountain were very much the same—hard mining, and both disposed to hoard their gold with arts mysterious and deep. He left the little mining-camp that nestled here in the mountains and walked far out upon the more important road that led to the larger camp beyond, where his mine and his habits measured the all he could summarize as life.

It was fully ten miles from Ruby Rock and Mollie's cabin to his own mud shack in Gray Horse Gulch, but he faced the distance carelessly and trod in the sand of the winding road with the easy grace that strength alone bestows. Nevertheless, it was almost dusk when he topped the final hill that overlooked the town, and there he came upon a wagon, halted at the summit where two roads had their junction.

In the bed of the wagon stood a piece of freight, entirely muffled in rags and sacks and wound about with pieces of rope that served both to keep its covering upon it and to lash it securely to the seat.

Fulton glanced at this article, then at the driver, who was down in the road lifting a hoof of one of his horses.

"Why, hullo, Black!" said Tom, in his heartiest manner. "Home, hey? What's your load?"

The driver placed the horse's hoof upon the earth and faced Fulton deliberately.

"Evenin', Tom," he drawled. "Yep—I'm back. Care to ride?"

"Might as well," said Tom.

They climbed up together and occupied the seat. Then Fulton asked.

"Have you got some newfangled minin' machinery wrapped up in these here sacks?"

"Nope—I've got a mystery," answered Black. "I've fetched in a mystery. Never nothin' like it into camp before, and I'm goin' to sell it here to-night." To his horses he added, "Giddap!"

"Goin' to sell the camp a mystery?"

echoed Fulton, thoroughly puzzled. "It ain't a sort of ghost?"

"You keep your shirt on. Wait and see," replied the driver. "When I say it's a mystery, why, that's what it is. And I'll bet it would make a ghost look knock-kneed and white around the gills to see it comin' here to Gray Horse Gulch."

"No! And where you goin' to take it?" Tom inquired, wrought to intense curiosity. "When you goin' to undress it?"

The horses were trotting briskly into camp. Black headed straight past the stable and on down the one business thoroughfare.

"Goin' to sell it after supper, right in front of Zeke's saloon," was his answer to Fulton's question. "And the whole durn town can come and bid her up."

He halted his wagon, a moment later, before the saloon in question, then proceeded calmly to unhook his horses and send them away to the stable. A crowd of men assembled promptly, and with Black and Fulton both declaring the swaddled freight to be a mystery, to be sold after dinner to the highest bidder, the interest spread with amazing alacrity.

Nearly every man in town was on the scene in half an hour. The word had gone forth that a mystery, mayhap a ghost, duly caged or bottled, had been fetched to the very door of Zeke's saloon, where it stood in a wagon elaborately covered with rags and ropes.

A gambler, bold and audacious, ran his fingers over the mystery and pinched it where he could.

"It's got legs like bones without no meat or skin on," he announced. "If it's just a dead skeleton, why, a skeleton ain't no ghost, and he won't fetch no fancy figures."

Those who felt of the mystery agreed that its legs were indeed hard and bony. The excitement increased. Zeke himself came forth from his place of drink and gambling. He was a pale-faced gambler, with an air of poise and self-assurance upon him that made him almost striking. His cold gray eyes betrayed no particular interest when half a dozen acquaintances informed him of all that was known concerning the mystery, but

he silently appraised the value, in saloon patronage, of the wagon and its contents, and immediately agreed with Black that the hour after supper would be early enough to reveal the facts with regard to the muffled piece of freight.

Black went calmly away to his supper. Fulton ate at a restaurant, and hastened again to the scene in front of Zeke's. Meantime speculation had been rife. The roped parcel had been guessed in twenty different manners. No two opinions as to its character coincided, but all were agreed the thing was doubtless something gruesome.

When the hour arrived for Black to unveil his parcel, the tension in the gathered throng of miners, teamsters, and gamblers had reached a point where farther delay would only have incited violence to the swaddling ceremonies in which the freight was wrapped. The saloon was deserted. Zeke, with his bar-keepers, his faro and keno dealers and even his Chinese roustabout, had joined the crowd in the meagre light which the lamps of the sidewalk afforded.

Black climbed deliberately into his wagon, and taking his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes and placed the thing in his pocket, after which he drew a knife and commenced to cut the ropes about his parcel.

There was absolute silence in the crowd. Expectancy chained all attention on the mystery. Black paused at his work when the sacks and rags were ready to fall from the object in the wagon.

"Boys," said he, "I picked up this here mystery over to Emigrant Loop. Picked up four, in fact, and sold the others down along the road. They're mighty valuable rackets." He closed his knife and put it into his pocket with exasperating slowness.

"Well--what is it?" demanded a voice.

"Now, hold on," admonished Black, reluctant to forego his moment. "I said I picked up four of these here mysteries and sold all but this one. And so I did." He paused, and added gravely: "Boys, them four mysteries was fetched out to the diggin's acrost the plains by two young married folks and the young bride's mother, which reckoned on makin' a stake by peddlin' the things in the

mines. They started with a load of the rackets and lost most all the herd. And the young husband feller got sick and died, and the girl done the same when come her baby, and the old lady was left alone, and these here mysteries was all she had, and I'm sellin' 'em off to raise her the dust to git back home, down East. And this one's the last there is fer sale, and it goes to the man who stacks up the biggest pile."

Once more he paused impressively, then laid his hand upon the all but falling rags.

"This here contrivance, boys," he announced dramatically, "is a sewin'-machine!"

With that he flung off the sacks and rags with effective haste—and the painted iron legs, the wheel, and the polished wooden case of the mechanism stood revealed to the thoroughly astounded audience.

"A sewin'-machine? Oh, hell!" said a miner near the wagon.

"Sewin'-machine!" echoed nearly every man in the crowd, and a chorussed guffaw relieved the unusual tension.

"Mystery?—you bet she's a mystery!" said a teamster in the group.

"And how do we know it ain't a thrashin'-machine?" demanded a small individual, whose one delight was contention.

"It might thrash you," replied a neighbor. "I've saw these here sewin'-machines a dozen times already."

"So have I," declared another. "I've run 'em. Sew like greased lightnin'. Them and steam-engines and printin'-presses got invented all together."

"Mystery? Hell of a mystery! Where's the bones and skull?" demanded a scornful gambler, who had hoped for a startling sensation. "This here is a stacked deck. Black, you'll have to stand the drinks fer this little game!"

"Didn't I say I fetched this here to sell?" inquired Black. "It cost more'n one hundred dollars, down East, and I'm goin' to take the money back to that old lady, stranded in this dog-gone State, or bust, and all you fellers have got to do is to bid up the price like miners which ain't fergot to be men! How much am I offered fer this patent-invented machine? It's guaranteed down-east

made, and so bran' new you could scrape off the bran to feed the cow, and all fixed up ready to darn socks and sew on your buttons or sew up the pocket of every miserable skinflint into camp."

He took off the cover. The light from the polished steel wrought a singular fascination on the men.

"By gosh! I don't exactly need no sewin'-machine at the shop," said the blacksmith, "but I'd like to go her a mess fer luck. I'll give you five dollars to leave me alone with it jest about ten minutes."

"Well—I'll do that much myself," said a miner. "Me and machinery is friends. I never yet seen the wheels and things I couldn't figure out and run."

"I took a clock all apart myself one time, and me only a boy," vouchsafed another. "I'll bet I could make that racket hum and spit out fire and smoke in about two shakes."

"Yep—well, that's all right," said Black, from the wagon, "but this ain't no game of five-dollar ante. This machine is here fer sale. The mother of the little wife that died—why, boys, she needs the dust."

A miner who had been a silent spectator pushed back his hat.

"I'll bid her up to fifty dollars for the sake of folks down East," said he. "But I'll pass along the machine to be sold again and raise more money."

"That's about the talk," agreed a gambler in the throng. "I'll add twenty-five myself, and take no holds on the mystery."

The bidding ceased. Above the silence that ensued was heard a voice: "I'd like to give five to run it half an hour. Couldn't we fix up a game to try our hand fer—"

"Here!" interrupted Zeke, proprietor of gambling-hall and bar. "I'll give you two hundred dollars fer the racket, just as she stands, and no more bidding. Is that a go?"

"Say! You bet it's a go!" cried Black from his stand. "She's yours right on the spot, and—"

"Fetch her in," said Zeke, in his way of business. "Don't talk no more, but fetch her in and git your money. We'll start a bran'-new gamblin' game to-night."

Excited anew and aroused once more

to consuming curiosity, the men fairly swarmed upon the wagon, in their eagerness to snatch the machine and convey it at once to the brilliantly lighted saloon where its owner presided.

In less than a minute it was carried and rolled to a place of prominence, between two layouts for gambling, and there a throng of stalwarts, who had suddenly developed a genius for mechanics, gathered about it to explain its use and the reasons and functions of levers, wheels, and screws.

"Now, then, hands off the game till she's ready," ordered Zeke, advancing through the crowd. "Where's Charlie Swan? Here, Swan, you oil her up ready for business. We'll see how much these fellers can sew. Boys, this sewin'-machine is a newfangled racket for betting. It's a dollar a minute to tackle the wheels, and the house pays three to one if you make her go and sew for ten minutes straight. Even money you can't make her sew one inch of rag. Five to one you can't make her sew a foot of cloth. Ten to one you can't make her sew on a button. House supplies all the fixin's and axle-grease. Players barred after half an hour, to give the next man a chance."

"Say!" said a voice. "Say—this is livin'!"

"Me first!" cried a miner. "I claim first whack, and here's five dollars for a starter!"

"Here, second!" "What's the matter with me?" cried others in the crowd.

"One at a time. The game is goin' to be open all night, right along," announced the proprietor. "Don't git excited. Here, let Swan git close enough to oil her up."

Swan was a modest engineer. He knew enough to open a drawer where the extras had been placed by a provident hand, and finding oil in a proper can, concluded his labors with commendable promptness.

"I guess she's ready," he said, as he arose from the stool provided for a seat—"ready to sew, or raise some little hell."

Meantime Zeke had procured a bolt of snow-white muslin from a near-by store, and having torn off strips the size of a towel, now came forward with an armful of material for the game.

"Where's the man who was sweatin' to spend his five?" he asked. "Here, Blisters, it was you that spoke up so nervy."

"Wal—of course—if any one else feels cheated," said Blisters, whose nerve was oozing from him rapidly, "why, don't let me interfere. I kin wait."

"You're scared," accused a gambler. "You ain't game."

As a matter of fact, a tendency towards caution had afflicted all the braggarts heretofore so eager to assail the machine. Blisters became pale.

"Oh, I'll tackle the racket," he said, courageously. "It's a long time since I seen a sewin'-machine, that's all. And they're jest like women—no two of 'em ever alike, and some of 'em no man on earth could ever git to run."

He paid his five dollars, accepted a piece of cloth from Zeke, and slowly took his place before the machine.

Absolute silence reigned in the room. He turned the driving-wheel slowly, placed his feet upon the treadle, and saw the needle-bar give three or four spasmodic stabs in quick succession before anything had been expected.

"He's got the trick," said a voice. "Oh! Blisters ain't no fool."

Enormously encouraged, Blisters gathered his cloth in his awkward hands and set the driving-wheel in motion rapidly. But his muslin refused to enter beneath the needle till he thought to lift the feeder-foot, when the sharp steel prod promptly caught him through the finger and drew forth gore and oaths.

His nerve was up, however, and he went at the task of sewing with a wild determination to conquer or to die. He perspired. He stuffed the muslin to its place, he spun the wheel, he broke the thread and knew nothing of what had happened, but for ten minutes wrought like a fiend, all the while his friends were instructing, suggesting, correcting and encouraging his labors.

"Here," said Zeke, interrupting the struggle at its most exciting climax, "you owe me five dollars more. Come up with the spon or give some other man a show."

Blisters arose, his face contorted with emotions, all violent.

"I was just gittin' onto her tricks,"

he said. "I can fix her next time just like fallin' off a house."

Eager to profit by Blister's mistakes, half a dozen men made a rush to attack the game. It was Fulton, however, who secured the seat. He had seen a machine five years before. He threaded the needle, tore away a snarl of thread from the bobbin, adjusted a new piece of muslin and began.

Two stitches he actually sewed. Then his clumsy feet reversed the wheel, the thread was snapped, and his triumph was ended. He too sweated and invited nervous prostration. He too snarled up everything snarlable, including his wits, and nearly went mad in an effort to achieve results. When he reeled away, defeated, the knowing observers about him had amended their former mechanical deductions and were now more eager than before to exhibit their prowess. Every one could see precisely where the other fellow had committed his blunders.

The game waxed even more intense with the next man's frantic efforts to sew. He performed very prodigies of error. He so thoroughly involved the cloth and mechanism that it seemed as if only an axe could suffice to part them.

After him a new victim offered himself to the silent mechanism's diabolism. When he had finished, his mind was on the brink of lunacy—yet he knew he should conquer at the next assault.

Those early machines, in the hands of the gentlest, most persuasive operator of the temperless sex, were the most outrageously exasperating devices ever fashioned in steel. They were utterly depraved. This machine at Zeke's was a thing of diabolical temperament. It tempted and fascinated every man in the place; it flirted with each new victim with a novel mechanical coquetry for every minute, but it sewed not three stitches in succession for all the fine frenzy and passion expended upon it, and broke nearly every spirit there.

By three o'clock in the morning, a worn-out, haggard group of men were all that remained in the place. On the floor were heaps of grimed and tortured rags, with snarls of thread in all directions. Zeke had taken in five hundred dollars, and the machine was merely warmed to the business.

On the following day there were men in plenty about the useful contrivance, the majority content to look it over and marvel at its powers of defeating utility. Not one of the victims felt satisfied to surrender, however, and none was so poor as to be minus a good and sufficient excuse for his failure to make the "critter" sew.

"If only I could take her all apart," said the man who had once dissected a clock, "I'll bet I'd make things look different."

"Yep," agreed a listener, "and a little giant powder, touched off in under her stomach, would make her look putty near as pretty."

Fulton essayed to sew again that afternoon. The mechanism held him with a deadly sort of fascination. He expended twenty dollars in a vain endeavor to retrieve the pride and money lost the previous night, and emerged from the conflict at last like a soul escaped from the heats and torments of Hades.

That evening there were victims in plenty who immolated themselves upon the shrine of this mechanical monstrosity, which devoured money, vitality, patience, perspiration, oil and gore at the price of half a dozen miserably abortive stitches which none could recognize as a needle's legitimate progeny.

Time after time the bewildered Fulton resumed the attack. He exhausted every resource to make the contrivance sew. Zeke, meantime, was coining money on his purchase. It was truly amazing what a versatile device that machine was proved to be. There were hundreds of ways in which it could run wrong. It was oiled till it dripped with these juices of persuasion. It had spat out tangles of thread for every tangle of oaths expended in its presence. That the thing was indeed a mystery, all were thoroughly agreed.

When Fulton's money was gone he stood about the torment for two whole days, marvelling more and more at the ingenuity of its stubbornness. Then Black, who had fetched it to camp, returned once more to Gray Horse Gulch. Fulton lured him aside.

"Say, Tim," said he, "I don't s'pose you took no lessons on sewin'-machines from the poor old lady you sold it



Drawn by Leon Gimpson

"GOOD BOY! GOOD BOY!" THEY ROARED

for, hey?—just by way of takin' an interest?"

"Nope," said Black. "I didn't s'pose nobody would ever want 'em to sew. A good old needle is so durn much handier and surer."

"Y-e-s, I guess it is," assented Fulton. "Funny, though, that you could sell the other three. There ain't been no one but Zeke git up a sewin'-machine gamble, has there?"

"Nope; that takes brains," answered Black. "One was bought from the store I sold it to by that little widder, Mollie Worthington, down to Ruby Rock, and you bet she's goin' to make it earn its livin'. She didn't buy it to play on like no pianer."

"Mollie—Mollie Worthington?" repeated Fulton. "Well—I'll be—"

"Yep," said Black; "and they say, now she's got it, she wouldn't marry the richest galoot in the country."

Fulton said no more. He returned to Zeke's to stare at the mechanism with others who had met with loss and humiliation in the game, and who now regarded the polished device as they might have regarded a beautiful woman who had attracted, then scorned their attentions.

Zeke advanced the odds on the game, but there was no one with skill sufficient to win so much as a dollar. That same afternoon the news went around that Fulton had gone away to raise another stake. That he meant to return and break the bank behind the machine, was the boast that all his friends repeated.

For five long days the unsubdued machine stood all but deserted at Zeke's. One or two miners were put to rout by the triumph of inventive genius, but all were awaiting Fulton's return, he having become, as it were, the leader of the mechanism's victims. It was nine o'clock when he came, one night, looking haggard and worn, but calm and self-reliant. He stopped at the bar for a drink to steady his nerves, and a crowd quickly gathered about him.

"Goin' to take some sass out of that there buckin' bronco of a sewin'-machine?" asked a teamster, anxious to see the mechanism tamed. "If she don't git her spirit broke pretty soon she'll never be no use in the world."

"I don't know whether to touch the

brute or not," said Fulton, sauntering slowly towards the contrivance. Secretly, however, he was crazy to engage in the struggle.

"Here," said Zeke, who had found the interest in sewing sadly diminishing, "I'll raise the odds and give you a show. I'll give you twenty minutes by the clock to sew a chunk of cloth two feet long and bet you ten to one you don't make her come to the scratch."

"Well—I don't know," said Fulton, suppressing his excitement. "I ain't got much money. Will you cover all I've got?"

"All you've got, and accommodate your friends," said Zeke.

"Well," said Tom, "I s'pose I'll have to tackle her again—and go broke."

He took his place before the machine and received a piece of muslin from the gambler's hand.

"I'll put up twenty dollars fer a starter," he said. "But—darn her soul—she's a terror."

He placed his money on a table near at hand. A great crowd gathered about him. He began to commit all his former blunders on the mechanism, with every evidence of distress upon his countenance.

For five precious minutes the struggle waged, and not a stitch had been produced. Fulton was sweating. His face was tense and white.

"Fifty dollars more that I fetch her yet," he said, raucously.

The money was up, and again the wheel was spinning, the levers were throbbing, and the needle was punching empty holes in the snow-white muslin pushed across the plate.

Not a man in the place misunderstood the meaning of the snarl of thread which Fulton presently snatched away from the shuttle and threw upon the floor. Nearly ten of his minutes were gone and not a stitch could he show.

"I'll fetch her yet!" he cried in desperation. "A hundred dollars says I'll fetch her yet!"

"Git it up," responded Zeke, satisfied by the cheerful deviltry of the machine. "Put up all you've got."

For a third time Fulton wrought in madness to achieve results. At the end of the bout he had nothing to his

credit, and only seven minutes of time remaining.

"Every bean in my wad!" he bawled in a frenzy. "One hundred and fifty—my pile!"

"Good boy!" "Dead game!" "By lordie! Git in!"

The expressions flung in thickly.

"Cover it all," said Zeke. "Seven minutes left now by the clock."

Fulton was seen to change, peculiarly. He opened a drawer, whipped out a shuttle that was filled with new thread, slipped it adroitly into place, touched the tension with deft, certain fingers and again made ready for the crucial encounter with the thing of steel. One or two men noted this surer manipulation. The excitement increased tremendously. Intensity marked every face.

With cloth in hands that took on ways of mastery, Fulton touched the wheel anew. It revolved, broke his thread and defeated him utterly. Almost instantly he made ready again, but the mechanism, long accustomed to revolt at various errors, now balked by habit.

Two minutes, packed with emotion, sped away. Only five remained. Slowly the wheel was urged around. Down over the work leaned Fulton, in all the travail of production. Up and down played the needle, and a stitch was left behind. Faster went the treadle then, and two, five, seven tiny stitches, pretty as links in a fairy's chain, were welded of the thread through the muslin.

One of the miners made a strange sound of laboring. Fulton was dumb.

Faster and faster danced the needle, and at every stroke it forged a link in the dainty cable of stitches. Six inches, a foot—a foot and a half of the perfect sewing was there in the cloth—and a murmur of excitement and awe shook the air.

In glad obedience, at last, the mechanism fairly hummed the song of industry, and from under the needle sped the cloth as if the levers, wheels, and bars rejoined in the mastery come to enslave their functions.

Enough to win the game was done, but Fulton still drove the wheel like mad. He spun the cloth in curves and turns, and the needle sped through and through it at his bidding. He smiled at last in triumph amounting to glory, for the conquered device was writing a word in the muslin by his will.

"Good boy! Good boy! Good boy!" reared a chorus of voices in the place.

And his twenty minutes having gone, Fulton arose, snatched the cloth from the hold of the two frail threads and flung it down as a victor flings his spoils.

For fifteen minutes, after Zeke had paid out the stake which Fulton had won, there was drinking, shouting, and hilarity in the place. Then Fulton escaped and struck across the hills to Ruby Rock.

When something like order was restored, the gambler, Zeke, fetched forth an axe and stood regarding the sewing-machine with doubt and mistrust in his eyes.

"Now that she's got to running," said he, "she'll never know how to stop. She'll let anybody sit here and sew."

Dispassionately he raised the axe and crashed it down upon the mechanism. It was shattered hopelessly.

"Take it away," said he. "I reckon we're pretty near even."

In his hand he still held the well-stitched piece of muslin by which Tom Fulton had won a golden stack of coins. In awe he stared at the fairy chain of stitches which Cupid himself might have fashioned. For the first time his gaze went following the curves of "writing" which the needle had left in the cloth.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he said at the end, for the sewed-in word was "Mollie."

Then Black came hurling himself in at the door, his whole being big with news.

"Old Fulton's goin' to be married!" he cried. "The weddin's all fixed to come off down at Ruby Rock, and the day's the third of June!"